DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 018 TM 029 356

AUTHOR Walpole, MaryBeth
TITLE National Rankings: Ramifications for Academic Units.
PUB DATE 1998-04-14
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Astronomy; *Business; *College Faculty; College Programs; Higher Education; *Institutional Characteristics; Instructional Effectiveness; *Physics; Program Evaluation; Qualitative Research; Self Evaluation (Groups); *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Ranking

ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted of the way faculty perceived the effects of national rankings on two departments in a large public research university. The department of physics and astronomy and the school of business of the university were both ranked in the top 20 nationally, but both were ranked lower than the administration and faculty wanted them to be, and the effects of the perceived low rankings were being felt in the core practices of teaching and learning. A total of 60 interviews, 29 in physics and astronomy and 31 in business, were conducted. In physics and astronomy, 59% of faculty members referred to the rankings, and 74% of business school faculty interviewed referred to national rankings. Faculty members believed that their low rankings, in addition to other funding problems, had negatively affected the resources received by the department and their research capability. They expressed concerns related to graduate student recruitment, faculty recruitment, and funding. In physics and astronomy, the ranking had created a negative cycle in which the department, unable to attract resources, was then unable to raise its national ranking. In the business school, the issues were somewhat different. Because the most important ranking used student satisfaction, the faculty felt pressured to keep students happy to raise the ranking. These findings open important areas for future research into the effects of national rankings on teaching and research. (Contains 30 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 427 018

National Rankings: Ramifications For Academic Units

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mary Beth Walpole

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

MaryBeth Walpole

UCLA
Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

AERA
April, 1998

TM029356

Correspondence to: walpole@ucla.edu

Please do not quote or cite without permission of the author

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Introduction

U.S. News and World Report (1998) believes their rankings are "one efficient means of comparing schools' strengths and weaknesses." Many people apparently agree with that statement, because an estimated three million copies of their rankings issues are sold each year (McDonough, et. al., 1997). National rankings of universities, and the individual schools and departments within them, have proliferated and have received a great deal of attention from the popular media and scholars. Scholars believe that there are several reasons for the proliferation and increased attention to the rankings, including the lack of cross-institutional information, the commodification of college knowledge and America's obsession with rankings of all kinds (Wright, 1990; Webster, 1992a&b; Hossler and Foley, 1995; Hunter, 1995; McDonough et. al., 1997). Although rankings of institutions and the departments and schools within them have garnered a great deal of attention, research documenting how the core functions of teaching and research are affected by the ranking of institutions and individual departments has been scant. This study seeks to fill that gap through a qualitative investigation of how faculty perceived the effects of national rankings on two departments in a large public research university.

The two departments considered in this investigation are a department of physics and astronomy, and a school of business. Although both units were ranked in the top 20 nationally[1], both of

[1]The business school ranking was according to *Business Week*, n3498, Oct. 21, 1996 and *U.S. News and World Report*, v122, n9, March 10, 1997. The physics and astronomy department ranking was according to rankings by the National Research Council in *Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States*, 1995 and *U.S. News and World Report*, v120, n11, March 18, 1996. *U.S. News and World Report* does not rank every type of graduate program every year. These rankings were the most current for the two units and were the rankings faculty referred to in interviews.

these units were ranked lower than the administration and faculty wanted them to be, and the effects of the perceived low rankings were being felt in the core practices of teaching and research.

Business school rankings examined in this study were those in Business Week, and in U.S. News and World Report (USNWR). The physics and astronomy department rankings were from the National Research Council (NRC) and USNWR. Although each ranking utilized a different methodology, all included reputation as part of their calculation. The business school rankings included measures for student satisfaction, and in fact, Business Week's rankings were based on only two criteria, one of which was a satisfaction survey of MBA graduates. The rankings for physics and astronomy did not include a student satisfaction variable; instead, the NRC rankings and the USNWR methodology for physics and astronomy were based on reputation only.

Background

National rankings of academic institutions began in 1910, but were little known outside of academic circles (Webster, 1985; Stuart, 1995). That changed, however, in 1983, when USNWR published its first reputational ranking of U.S. colleges. The rankings and the institutional responses to them have been the subject of many discussions and numerous articles. Several different constituencies monitor an institution's ranking including alumni, potential donors, students, parents, and prospective students, prompting a variety of responses (Wright, 1990; Webster 1992a&b; Machung, 1995; studentPOLL, 1995). Adding volitility to the responses from

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

constituencies, the ranking methodologies change with each iteration (Webster, 1992b; Machung, 1995).

One response researchers have noted has been that rankings affect the number of applications colleges and universities receive (Wright, 1990; Webster, 1992b; Fombrun, 1996) and shape admissions policies (Hunter, 1995; studentPOLL, 1995). The effect on admissions is one reason researchers believe that colleges and universities manipulate the reported data to improve their ranking (Wright, 1990; Hunter, 1995; Stecklow, 1995). Although rankings' effect on applicant pools has been documented, rankings are not used by all prospective students. The percentage of students utilizing rankings in their decisions ranged from 41% to 54%, and students who are traditionally-aged, Asian-American, and from higher socioeconomic status families are more likely to use rankings (Hossler and Foley, 1995; studentPOLL, 1995; McDonough, et. al., 1997).

Scholars believe that rankings are used by students primarily because of the lack of alternative cross-institutional data (Webster, 1992a&b; Hossler and Foley, 1995). Academic reputation is the most important criteria students use in deciding where to attend college (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1995), and researchers believe rankings are used by students as an indicator of academic reputation (McDonough, et. al., 1997). Rankings are also important to colleges and universities and can serve as an incentive for institutional improvement (Webster, 1992a&b). Webster posited that institutions want to reap the benefits of a high ranking, and will improve their facilities and programs to raise their score.

5 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Business schools, in particular, have made changes to improve their programs because of the importance of student satisfaction in the rankings done by Business Week (Fombrun, 1996). Business Week utilizes two criteria in its ranking, the satisfaction of MBA students and the satisfaction of corporate recruiters. Keeping students satisfied is crucial to a school's ranking, and MBA students' satisfaction depends, in large part, on the programmatic instruction they receive.

Researchers have investigated the connection between student satisfaction and institutional ranking (Webster, 1992a; Grunig, 1997). Satisfaction is a measure of how good an institution is compared to the expectations students have (Grunig, 1997). Student expectations are often shaped by the department's ranking; that is, students expect more from highly ranked academic institutions. Yet, high expectations can be difficult for institutions to meet consistently, and can result in higher levels of student dissatisfaction (Fombrun, 1996; Grunig, 1997).

Business schools face an additional pressure when trying to keep students satisfied because MBA students often enroll to increase their earning capacity as well as their skill level, a phenomenon known as credentialling (Strober, 1990). The pressure business schools face in satisfying students interested in credentialling has been noted as a unique pressure that influences the rankings (Fombrun, 1996). Student satisfaction is included in the Business Week rankings, and scholars have recognized the importance of the those rankings and the influence of them on institutional strategy (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Fombrun, 1996).

Because Business Week rankings are considered more important than the USNWR rankings, improving the rankings meant improving student satisfaction, which, in this study, impacted the teaching function.

In the physics and astronomy department, the NRC rankings are usually more important to the faculty than the USNWR rankings. Research on graduate departments rankings, such as the NRC rankings of physics and astronomy, has found that these rankings are reputational and highly correlated with the scholarly productivity within that department (Grunig, 1997). In turn, rankings of scholarly productivity are dependent upon several factors within the department including the number of faculty, the number of doctoral degrees granted, the annual research budget, the number of doctoral students, and the percentage of faculty receiving research grants from prestigious governmental agencies (Grunig, 1997). The capacity for research is highly important, then, in determining the department's ranking, and the research function was most adversely affected by the low ranking in this study.

Theoretical Framework

In the organizations literature, educational institutions are commonly thought of as open systems, that is, complex organizations that interact with and rely on their environments for resources and a market for their products, in this case graduates as well as new knowledge (Scott, 1983). Within the organizations literature, institutional theory focuses on the search for resources and legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Institutional theorists believe that the resources an organization can secure

impacts its legitimacy, or acceptance, with individuals and other organizations (Ibid.). Conversely, an organization's level of acceptance or legitimacy can impact the amount of resources it is able to secure (Ibid.).

In colleges and universities, resources are not only endowment funds, state appropriations, and research grants, but include top faculty and excellent students. Resources and reputation in U.S. colleges and universities, echoing institutional theorists, are intertwined and mutually reinforcing so that institutions with high resource levels enjoy excellent reputations, and those with excellent reputations are able to secure further resources (Astin, 1993). Thus, universities' reputations and rankings have a direct bearing on the resources they receive to carry out their missions.

In fact, reputation is particularly important to colleges and universities because the goods they provide are intangible "credence goods" (Fombrun, 1996). Scoring highly in national rankings is an important way to secure a reputation as excellent, and may create a barrier, or halo effect, that schools and departments with lower rankings find difficult to surmount (Ibid.). The halo effect also allows schools and departments that drop in the rankings a little bit of time to improve before their reputations suffer damage serious enough to impact their resource levels. Overall, monetary resource levels in institutions of higher education in the United States have been shrinking over the past decade (Gumport, 1993; Slaughter, , 1993), so securing sufficient means for continued growth has required increased attention. Colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to raise funds from a variety of sources.

Securing non-monetary resources is also crucial for institutions, and these resources consist primarily of the best students and faculty institutions are able to attract. While colleges and universities are trying to attract monetary and non-monetary resources, students, faculty, and funders are attempting, simultaneously, to invest their time and money in the highest quality institutions. This is because scholars believe that human beings, including the prospective students and faculty who utilize rankings, are status maximizers, and attempt to invest their own time and resources in situations and institutions they believe will bring them the most benefit (DiMaggio, 1979; McDonough, Antonio, Horvat, 1996).

Faculty perceptions of rankings are important for several reasons. The most obvious is that most academic institutions work under a system of shared governance in which faculty are consulted on or are responsible for the academic functions of a school or department. Their perceptions, then, of the ranking and its ramifications will influence the school or department response. Faculty perceptions are also important because faculty have the most interaction with students. Therefore, their perceptions of the effects of rankings on teaching and research are critical because it impacts the interaction. This study specifically examines faculty perceptions of rankings in two academic units.

Methodology

Data for this project come from a multi-year study investigating the effects of environmental changes and pressures on one university campus. Over the course of one year, faculty in a

department of physics and astronomy and a school of business were interviewed for approximately one hour. Respondents were asked about their work, environmental changes affecting their work, school or department and what they saw as the critical issues facing their department or school. A total of 60 such interviews were taped, transcribed, and analyzed from the two units, 29 interviews in physics and astronomy and 31 in the business school. Coding was done according to patterns found in the data. Those patterns included faculty members referring to rankings as an obstacle to their work, as an environmental change, or as a critical issue facing their unit. In physics and astronomy, 17 of 29 faculty (59%) interviewed referred to rankings, and 23 of 31 faculty (74%) in the business school referred to rankings during the interviews.

The Units

The Department of Physics and Astronomy (P&A) in the public research university used in this study was ranked nationally in the top 20, but was not in the top ten. Their ranking was viewed as a concern, and the Department Chair said "We're good, but not quite good enough. Our ranking, [is] in the second tier, so we're talking about getting out of the second tier." Their ranking had been stable for the last ten years, as measured both by the NRC and USNWR. The department, like its counterparts in other universities, was facing a myriad of environmental pressures. At the end of the cold war, the federal funding directed toward physics declined rapidly. Less funding ultimately resulted in less money to support graduate students, fewer faculty lines allocated by administrators, and a contracting field. The state of the field, combined with the rapid rise

of other specialties such as biotechnological fields, reduced the numbers of highly talented students enrolling in physics departments, and thus the numbers of highly talented faculty entering the field.

The P&A faculty in this study recognized these multiple pressures. In the words of one faculty member:

> The 20th century has been the century of physics... the 21st century will be the century of biology... physics was the dominant science... [but now] it is going to be harder... to get some body of people to enter the field... as students, or... as a faculty member.

The Department Chair acknowledged the changed funding situation, saying that particular governmental agencies used to:

> typically give $150,000 or $200,000, [but we] now have a hard time getting $50,000... [and] $50,000 a year is not enough to support graduate students... so [it] has become extremely difficult for individuals to maintain research programs.

Adding to this difficult situation was the pressure national rankings brought. Faculty members believed that their low ranking, in addition to the factors named above, had negatively affected the resources received by the department, and thus their research capability. Faculty expressed concern in predominately three areas: graduate student recruitment, faculty recruitment, and funding.

Graduate students are critical to a successful university research agenda, a fact widely recognized by P&A faculty. In the words of one faculty member: "Graduate students are the key ingredient of the university... graduate students are essential to the research." However, P&A was having a more difficult time attracting

good graduate students. Many faculty believed the difficulty was due to the ranking. One said the department

> should be able to recruit better quality students... [but] the perception of the department... makes a big difference to people who apply... This is not perceived as a very strong department... you have to bring the department up to rank in the top ten.

Another faculty believed that "prospective students... look at the top ten and say 'I'll apply to these five or those five.'" A third faculty member explained that "there has been... about thirty percent fewer applications received... in all the major graduate schools. We feel that more harshly than most because... at an institution which is... where we're ranked... students may walk away."

In addition to the difficulty attracting graduate students, the faculty believed that hiring new faculty with excellent research potential was made more difficult by the ranking. One faculty member said the ranking was "pretty important, and it determines a lot of things... people will base their decisions on it, like... hiring." Another faculty member believed that "with a good reputation comes... a more attractive place for new faculty. So reputation is very important." A third added that P&A needed to "recruit young faculty members... good, solid recruitments, and we haven't been able to do that for many years."

The last faculty member quoted believed that good faculty members would join the department if the facilities were better. However, faculty members also believed their low rankings hurt their ability to secure funding for improved facilities, an indication of the cycle in which faculty felt caught. Without facilities to attract

faculty and graduate students, securing resources was difficult. However, without funding, improving the facilities to attract graduate students and new faculty was also arduous. One faculty member said: "any top institution... has a mutual science center. We don't... [and] we don't have a critical mass of people to apply for that funding... if we had a mutual science center... our ranking would go up dramatically." Another faculty member said the ranking "can hurt you from the point of view of a funding agency." A third explained: "Let's say you're a funding agency... You can only fund a certain number of people... they're going to say 'well, I think we should fund the best places'... then a place like [this]... if you don't have the best reputation... you become everybody's second choice."

The faculty themselves recognized the cycle of reputation and resources. One said "the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker. And we are weak." Another believed a low ranking "becomes self-perpetuating... you can lose out... the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." A third explained "the way these ratings are made... the number one thing you can have [is if] you're highly ranked before... you tend to do well in the future."

The business school in this study had not yet become entrenched in the negative cycle of resources and reputation. Like the P&A department, the business school was ranked in the top 20, but not in the top ten, and the ranking was a cause for concern. One of the differences between the P&A department and the business school was that the business school had only dropped out of the top ten in the most recent round of Business Week rankings. Although

there were immediate effects of the drop out of the top ten, the long-term resources, reputation cycle had not become entrenched.

Again, like P&A, the school faced additional pressures. One pressure was brought about by a high degree of credentialling in which students engaged. That is, many students attended business school because securing an MBA led to professional advancement, not necessarily because they were intrinsically motivated to learn. This phenomenon was widely recognized by the faculty. One said 'we have a culture of students who live here two years... and do as little work as possible and then get a big salary increase." Another faculty member said "education is simply a byproduct... getting the MBA is just a stepping stone."

Another pressure was the university's increased attention to teaching, occurring, in part, because the university increasingly utilized student course evaluations in promotion and tenure decisions. The third additional pressure was also caused by the changing university environment. There was less state funding available to the school, increasing its reliance on tuition funds from the MBA and executive education programs and its reliance on private sources of funding.

These three additional environmental pressures -- credentialling, increased importance of teaching, and increased importance of tuition and private dollars -- combined with the pressure of rankings to impact the core process of teaching. This occurred, in large part, because of the student satisfaction variable, which, according to faculty, put a premium on meeting and exceeding student desires and expectations. According to one faculty member:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> The watershed event was the Fall of 1988 when Business Week published its first survey... it ranked business schools... entirely [on] the student experiences and the... recruiters, people who hire students... So we can all be Nobel prize winners and end up being... the 200th ranked business school.

Although the faculty understood, and may not have agreed with, the way Business Week ranked institutions, dropping out of the top ten was cause for concern. The three areas that concerned faculty the most were the pressure they felt to teach students only what students wanted in order to keep them "happy," the pressure exerted because some of the biggest corporate recruiters only recruit students from top ten schools, and the initial pressure on resources.

The first pressure, to keep students happy, was the effect most often discussed in connection to the rankings. Faculty believed that the students seeking a credential, with education as a "byproduct," wanted high grades in order to get hired by the best companies paying the highest salaries. To keep these students satisfied, the faculty felt pressured to provide entertaining classes that did not contain the content or rigor faculty thought necessary, lest they be too challenging for the students. Many faculty were quite upset by it. One believed: "there is outside pressure to perform well in class... and... that has affected the rigor in classes... because of... how Business Week rates schools." Another said "some professors feel... 'I've got to go and pander to the MBAs'... [and] the MBAs, they don't want... academics." A third explained that

> the business school is nationally ranked and so... Business Week and U.S. News and World Report... put a certain amount of pressure on... faculty member[s] to basically want students

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> to leave feeling good about the class... [so] there's a temptation to pander to the students as a result.

A fourth recognized the issue, saying: "The ranking has dropped, we need to move up, and in order to move up, you have to improve your teaching." Finally, a fifth professor believed

> the Business Week survey... has this consumeristic notion of asking students... [and] if you go too consumeristically oriented, then... the sole measure of how well I did in class today is 'Did they enjoy it? Did they have fun?'... they're not really stretching their brains enough.

The students wanted good grades to get the best jobs. However, the drop in rankings meant that some top corporate recruiters stopped coming to the school. This development worried faculty because corporate recruiters' ranking of schools was a large part of the Business Week ranking and because students could be less satisfied if the top recruiters would not consider them. One faculty member said: "we're now being ranked by Business Week... the school's ranked [between 10th and 20th]. In my specialty, that's disastrous. Most of the firms that recruit into... my field don't recruit at any school that isn't in the top ten." Another explained that

> we get really jerked around by... external ratings... we're not in the top ten... [and a top consulting corporation] doesn't recruit in any schools but the top ten schools... our students are enormously enraged 'cause we drop[ped]... [and the consulting corporation is] no longer coming here this year.

A third faculty member said "the ranking[s]... also affect... placement of our students... one element [of the ranking] is on how recruiters perceive our students... so the recruiter has information about the school." A fourth believed "recruiters and executives are... not happy with the product."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Just as recruiters would not recruit because the school dropped out of the top ten, employers would not pay to send their employees to the business school, which was an effect on the school's ability to secure resources discussed by the faculty. The Faculty Chair said: "Lots of companies will pay for employees' continuing education... many companies require it, and have a tendency to pay for programs... in the top ten." Another related that "one of my best students... said that when she came here... she said [to her employer] 'well, I want to go to [this business school]' and it was [not ranked in the top ten] and they were reluctant to pay."

Faculty worried about employers not paying for employees to attend this business school and they also worried about generating and securing other resources including high quality students, tuition funds, and private donations. With respect to the quality of students, one believed the ranking had "a huge direct impact on the quality of the students... that we're able to get." Another faculty member articulated the connection between the issue of rankings, the quality of students, and employer perceptions when he said the ranking "is important... because that's how students perceive us and employers perceive us... [and the low ranking means] we don't get the best students and they don't get the best jobs, and therefore we start going down in the rankings." A third believed "ranking affects our incoming students... when they apply to school, they feel if they apply and get into a high rank[ed] school, they may have better job prospects."

In addition to the effect on the quality of students, faculty also worried that tuition and other resources needed by the school would

be negatively affected by the drop in ranking. One said "our ratings have a big impact on our MBA and executive education revenues." Another recognized that "we generate funds from... tuition and... we need to move up [in the rankings to keep tuition funds.]" Others mentioned donors' response to rankings. One said "we do... see people stop writing checks, donors... [because of] the external rating system. So financially, there's a very strong limitation." Another believed "the ranking will also affect your fund raising activities." A third explained "our ranking has gone down... and [a fund raising group] is taking on the responsibility to help raise $70 million... 'so they're saying... 'why should we work hard to raise $70 million for you?... What's the value here?'"

Faculty were also concerned about the school's response to the rankings and its future if the ranking stayed low. One said "if we are not in the top 20, we really will start losing students and people." Another believed that "it's very seductive to relinquish our processes to Business Week and say we are whatever they say we are. That's a serious threat." A third worried that "at the rate we're going, we're going to be a little regional school instead of... one of the top five in the country."

Discussion

This study revealed how faculty perceived the effects of low national rankings on the core functions of teaching and research. In P&A, the ranking had created a negative cycle in which the low ranking meant the department was less successful in securing needed resources. Unable to attract resources, the department found it difficult to raise the national ranking to the desired level. This

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

cycle, not unlike a catch-22, had affected the research process. Faculty were concerned about securing graduate students, new faculty, and research funding, all of which are necessary for research productivity. Since the NRC ranking, which were the most important rankings to P&A, rated on the program's reputation of scholarly quality, publishing more, and more influential, articles was one key to raising the ranking. The issue of how to break the cycle of reputation and resources once it becomes entrenched was a question with which the department was struggling.

The business school was struggling with a different set of questions. Because the most important ranking to the school, Business Week, used student satisfaction as one of the variables, faculty felt pressured to keep students happy in order to raise the ranking. Since the students were primarily seeking MBAs, the faculty interacted with them in the classroom, thus the ranking impacted the core process of teaching. Keeping students happy in the classroom, faculty believed, resulted in pressure to reduce the rigor. There were also negative implications for student satisfaction because some top recruiters would not recruit at a school ranked less than tenth. Although there were negative implications for resources, faculty were worried about the future if the ranking continued to drop. A quick recovery to the top ten would minimize the damage, and prevent the negative cycle of reputation and resources from becoming entrenched.

The faculty's strategy for addressing the ranking and specifically the issue of student satisfaction and classroom rigor was to change the structure of the classroom grading process. Faculty

standardized the exam sequence in the core classes. This standardization allowed faculty to act as "coaches" to assist students in passing the exams. Control for the content, then, was out of the faculty's hands because they were forced to teach the content necessary for passing the exam. Faculty were generally supportive of this solution. One said of teaching students for a standardized exam: "we were there to help them prepare, we were forced to go through this hard stuff... so we were their buddy." The faculty hoped that the standardization of the exams would keep students' satisfaction high while relieving faculty of the pressure they felt to reduce rigor. Increased rigor also may raise the ranking because recruiters may be happier with the students they recruit. Raising the ranking in the next round of Business Week rankings would prevent further erosion of the school's needed resource base, and restore the school's ability to garner new resources.

Webster (1992a&b) wrote that low rankings can be an incentive for institutional improvement. He posited that colleges and universities would improve to reap the benefits associated with high rankings. Yet, as can be seen in this study, improvement can be difficult in some contexts, such as in P&A, once the negative cycle of resources and reputation becomes entrenched. In the business school context, the low ranking resulted in faculty feeling pressured to reduce the rigor of classes -- something that could hardly be considered an improvement. Although the faculty devised a method of adding the rigor back into the curriculum while minimizing (hopefully) the student dissatisfaction, it remains to be seen if this approach will result in an improvement in the ranking. Because

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

student satisfaction is one of two variables in the Business Week ranking, improving the ranking necessarily means making students more satisfied. It appears, then, that when and how rankings serve as an incentive for improvement depends upon the context of the unit, what the rankings are based on, and the length of time over which low rankings were experienced.

Attracting quality students in both units, and additionally attracting high quality faculty in P&A, was a concern resulting from the rankings. The faculty perceived that prospective students and faculty would be attracted to better ranked institutions. The faculty assumed that both students and other faculty members were status maximizers, who would be attracted to other institutions with more prestige and, therefore, more resources, better facilities and job prospects. This perception has largely been borne out in studies of the effect of ranking on admissions which have found that numbers of applicants decline when an institution's ranking drops, forcing schools and departments to admit either smaller classes, or less-statistically impressive students (Wright, 1990; Webster, 1992b; Fombrun, 1996).

The business school hoped that a quick return to the top ten would be a satisfactory solution, but the situation in P&A was more difficult. According to the faculty chair, the department's outcome for faculty recruitment was successful in specific sub-specialties where the department was very strong compared to other institutions. The faculty and the administration was still struggling with recruitment strategies in other sub-specialties. To recruit high quality students, the department began to pay more attention to

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

marketing, revamping brochures and the department's web site to make them more attractive to students. Although the department chair thought these strategies were beginning to work, the department was continuing to search for ways of appealing to students.

Conclusion/Implications for further research

In this study of the effect of national rankings on the core academic processes of teaching and research, several issues were apparent and important. The first was that rankings which were perceived as low by faculty did impact the teaching and research processes of these two units. Despite being ranked nationally in the top 20, the fact that they were not in the top 10 nationally had negative implications for faculty's ability to teach students and conduct research.

Several important questions remain. Once a department, or an institution, is caught in the negative cycle of resources and reputation, how can it be broken? Without new resources, which are difficult to attract, especially in the current fiscal environment, what steps can an academic unit take to raise its ranking? With a lower than desired ranking, how can a department or school attract new resources? Even when rankings are incentive for improvement, deciding upon the best direction and then acting on that decision can be difficult.

Another question is the inclusion of a student satisfaction variable. Students are an essential component of schools and departments, and their satisfaction should be taken into account, since dissatisfied students would be an indicator that the department

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

or school has room for improvement. However, as seen in this case, utilizing student satisfaction as a component of the rankings contributed to a situation that had an impact on the educational mission. Higher education has shifted to become more responsive to constituents' demands in recent years due to public calls for accountability, but it is important to consider the potential ramifications of a more consumer-oriented educational experience. The question of how to incorporate student satisfaction into a measure of educational quality has not been answered.

Measuring the quality of education and educational institutions is a vital public interest, and one that institutions and educators have not addressed sufficiently. One result is that private, profit-driven enterprises have stepped up to fill the information gap. The lack of cross-institutional data has been cited as one reason the rankings have proliferated (Webster, 1992a&b; Hossler and Foley, 1995). There is no doubt that, given the popularity of these rankings, publishers will continue to sell magazines ranking academic institutions. Annual sales of several ranking publications has been estimated at $16 million (McDonough, et. al., 1997). With so much potential profit at stake, can the information found in the rankings be impartial? Do the publishers have a vested interest in ensuring that their publications contain changes in the rankings and novel information? Anne Machung (1995) has referred to this phenomenon as "credible instability," in which magazines with no changes would not sell, and changes in the rankings that are too large would not be credible. Given the resource implications, institutions, and the schools and departments within them, must respond to the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

rankings. The question of how to respond, and the extent to which these for-profit enterprises influence the agendas of colleges and universities remains unanswered.

The findings of this study open several avenues of needed research on the effect of rankings on the core processes of teaching and research. The study was a small first step, but the results indicate that more research on the impact of rankings within academic units is needed. A study focused on the effects of rankings at multiple institutions would be a good next step. Future studies could focus on the differential effects of rankings on professional schools and academic disciplines. Another avenue would be comparative studies investigating rankings' effects on schools and departments ranked in the top ten, as well as those ranked out of the top 20. Focusing on the connection between the measures used in the rankings and the institutional responses would be another area of investigation.

This is an important area of research given the findings and questions regarding the impact of rankings on teaching and research raised in this study. It is also important because of the proliferation of these rankings and the potential profit associated with them.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Bibliography:

Art and Science Group. (1995). studentPOLL. Vol. 1, No. 1.

Astin, A. (1993). Assessment for Excellence. Oryx Press. Phoenix.

Business Week, no. 3498, Oct. 21, 1996, pp 110-122.

DiMaggio, P.J. (1979) Review Essay: On Pierre Bourdieu. American Journal of Sociology. AJS 84, vol. 6, July, 1979, 1460-1474.

DiMaggio, P. J. and Powell, W. (1983) The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. American Sociological Review, vol. 48, April 1983, 147-160.

Elsbach, Kimberly, D., and Kramer, Roderick, M. (1996) Members' Responses to Organizational Identity Threats: Encountering and COuntering the Business Week Rankings. Administrative Science Quarterly, vol. 41, (September 1996), 442-476

Fombrun, C.J. (1996). Reputation: Realizing value from the corporate image. Harvard University Press. Boston.

Goldberger, M.L., Maher, B.A., Flattau, P.E., (Eds.). (1995). Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States: Continuity and Change. National Research Council. National Academy Press. Washington, D.C. pp 311, 314, 340.

Grunig, S.D. (1997, January/February). Research, Reputation, and Resources: The Effect of Research Activity on Perceptions of Undergraduate Education and Institutional Resource Acquisition. Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 68, No. 1.

Gumport, Patricia J. (1993) The Contested Terrain of Academic Program Reduction. Journal of Higher Education. May/June 1993, Vol. 64, No. 3, 283-311.

Halpern, S. (1987). Professional Schools in the American University. In B. Clark (Ed.). The Academic Profession. University of California Press. Berkeley.

Hossler, D., and Foley, E.M. (1995). Reducing the noise in the college choice process: The use of college guidebooks and ratings. In D. Walleri and M.K. Moss (Eds.). New Directions in institutional research: No. 88. Evaluating and responding to college guidebooks and rankings. Jossey Bass. San Francisco.

Hunter, B. (1995). College Guidebooks: Background and Development. In D. Walleri and M.K. Moss (Eds.). New Directions in institutional research: No. 88. Evaluating and responding to college guidebooks and rankings. Jossey Bass. San Francisco.

Machung, A. (1995, May). Changes in college rankings: How real are they? Paper presented at the meeting of the Association for Institutional Research, Boston.

McDonough, P.M., Antonio, A.L., Horvat, E.M. (1996). College Choice as Capital Conversion and Investment. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August, 1996.

McDonough, P.M., Antonio, A.L., Walpole, MB., and Perez, L. (1997). College Rankings: Democratized College Knowledge for Whom?. Forthcoming.

Sax, L., Astin, A., Korn, W., Mahoney, K. (1995) The American freshman: National norms for fall 1995. Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, Los Angeles.

Scott, W. R. (1983). Organizations, Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Scott, W. Richard (1995) Institutions and Organization. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks. CA.

Slaughter, Sheila (1993) Retrenchment in the 1980's: The Politics of Prestige and Gender. Journal of Higher Education. May/June 1993. Vol. 64. No. 3. 250- 282.

Stecklow, S. (1995, April 5). Colleges inflate SATs and graduation rates in popular guidebooks. Wall Street Journal, pp. A1, A4, A8.

Strober, M. (1990). Human Capital Theory: Implications for HR Managers. Industrial Relations, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring 1990).

Stuart, D.L. (1995). Reputational rankings: Background and Development. In D. Walleri and M.K. Moss (Eds.). New Directions in institutional research: No. 88. Evaluating and responding to college guidebooks and rankings. Jossey Bass. San Francisco.

U.S. News and World Report, vol. 120, no. 11, March 18, 1996, pp 114.

U.S. News and World Report, vol. 122, no. 9, March 10, 1997, pp 82-83.

U.S. News and World Report., vol. 124, no. 8, March 02, 1998.

Webster, D.S. (1985, Winter). James McKeen Cattell and the Invention of Academic Quality Rankings, 1903-1910. The Review of Higher Education, Vol. 8, No. 2.

Webster, D.S. (1992a, September/October). Academic Rankings: First on a list of one. Academe, 19-36.

Webster, D.S. (1992b, March/April). Rankings of undergraduate education in U.S. News and World Report and Money: Are they any good? Change, 19-31.

Wright, B.A. (1990, Winter). The rating game: How the media affect college admission. The College Board Review, 158, 12-33.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE